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A Critical Analysis of the Deconstruction of the Fear of Speech in Sexton's Poetry

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Abstract

Decentralized from decision-making processes, women have been placed at the periphery. Their silencing has been fundamental and intentional on the part of patriarchal institutions, for the sake of keeping them behind the discursive scene. To this effect, this paper examines the rebirth of women from prior states whereby they used to be denied the right to sprout the wings towards language within a 'logocentric' society. A deep dive into Helen Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa"[1] provides grassroots for allowing a woman to transform silence into articulation. The poetry of Anne Sexton is a case study to witness the drastic change from a crippling fear of speaking into an audacity of a number of speakers in "Lullaby", "Music Swims Back to Me" and "The Exorcists" to acquire language with which every female orator will be equipped to conquer the masculinist world without anxiety.

Keywords: Fear, Speaking, Logocentrism, French Feminist, Castration Anxiety

1. Introduction

'Glossophobia' is defined as the fear of public speaking. It is classified as a subcategory of social anxiety, justified by the person's growing panic of facing the public as Hancock et al admit. The lack of audacity to perform a speaking activity is explained by anxiety disorder (Waheed 2014). In this regard, anxiety is a condition of distress and terror brought about by a prior state of a menacing situation. In other words, the decision of delivering a speech before an audience is accompanied by a strong sensation of anxiety, indicating that something menacing has approached. Thus, the public orator encounters a lack of easiness at the very idea of choosing to do a presentation in front of a number of individuals. According to Kirkwood and Melton, 'anxiety disorders' are the prime form of depression experienced by public speechmakers. These orators opt for evading the process at first, but then get absorbed in acute agony (Raja 217).

2. The Construction of the Fear of Public Speaking

The fear of public speaking has posed a real threat. Most people are afraid of facing the audience before they are trained how to overcome that blatant fear. Being at the centre of the focus helps release emotions of anxiety, resulting in getting a shiver, enormous sweating, and difficulty controlling feelings of worry. The sense of tension intervenes, for the speaker starts

to worry about how to confront whether known or unknown people. In this regard, S. E. Luca, in *The Art of Public Speaking* argues that everyone has encountered the torment of standing before the public in meetings, gatherings, workshops and every day situations. He also maintains that those who communicate well in daily settings, internalize the feeling of fright, but know how to surpass it. Here, Luca admits that everyone, experts in public speaking or trainees, professionals or students alike have undergone the ghost of fear that keeps haunting them. Verderber postulates that: "Public speaking, a sustained formal presentation by a speaker to an audience, is simply one form of human communication. So learning to be an effective public speaker will help you to be more effective in other communication settings as well" (qtd. in Raja 95).

Martel equates fear to the "only" haunting "enemy" or "spy" that intervenes to block the orator by displaying his or her "weakest spot". He states that it is:

> [L]ife's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary, how well 1 know. It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unerring ease. It begins in your mind, always. One moment you are feeling calm, self-possessed, happy. Then fear, disguised in the garb of mild-mannered doubt**,** slips into your mind like a spy. (161-62)

As far as the speaker's body is concerned, it is astute to note that it is subjected to an extreme change when exposed to fear. Martel further explicates the symptoms of a scared lecturer, willing to make a presentation:

> Fear next turns fully to your body, which is already aware that something terribly wrong is going on. Already your lungs have flown away like a bird and your guts have slithered away like a snake. Now your tongue drops dead like an opossum, while your jaw begins to gallop on the spot. Your ears go deaf. Your muscles begin to shiver as if they had malaria and your knees to shake as though they were dancing. Your heart strains too hard, while your sphincter relaxes too much. (161-62)

In the above cited statement, Martel depicts what happens to the body of the one who will present a communication: The "tongue drops", the "jaw begins to gallop", the "muscles begin to shiver" while the "knees" start "dancing". Researchers have contradictory views on the implication of gender in the entry into fear. Some critics consider women to be among the underlying people suffering from distress at a public performance. Rapee and Spence point at the prevalence of behavior in hampering an orator from speaking without terror. They maintain that women, because of their reserved character, have the habit to remain shy, timid and silent in situations where they are supposed to expose the self by expressing their opinions. However, McLean and Hope are skeptical of the allegation that females are prone to 'glossophobia' more than males (Waheed 4).

3. Cixous and Language

French feminist and philosopher Helen Cixous probes the issue of female verbalization inhibition within the parameter of a 'logocentric' dynamic. Basically inspired by the Lacanian theory, the French scholar stresses the importance of language. Jacques Lacan quotes "I identify myself in language" (qtd. in Cavallaro 30). He considers language the first and foremost paradigm through which human beings restore themselves and pitch their existence. The linguistic identity is "a continual process, an unending experience" (Lemma 93). Julia Kristeva deems it necessary that the "subject" undergoes a "process" before the acquisition of language. She explicates the unfixed aspect of identities, including that of "the mother as a speaking being" before reaching the transitional phase (qtd. in Balsam 92). According to her:

> [A]ll identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning and, as a result, the identity of the speaker. And in order to take account of this destabilization of meaning and of the subject I thought the term 'subject in process' would be appropriate. Process in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled. (qtd. in Cavallaro 78)

For French feminists, the male empowerment stems from a heritage which favors man to woman. The hegemony of the male discourse is the cause of the female identity crisis. Man has a "masculine rationality that has always privileged reason, order, unity and lucidity, and it has done so by silencing and excluding the irrationality, chaos and fragmentation that ha[ve] come to represent femininity" (Moi 131). Language has been the tool to belittle women as men "used to control women" by language. They have acquired language to possess and then denigrate them (Lehrich 186).

In psychoanalysis, 'castration anxiety' or the fear of lacking is a concept propagated by Freud to allude to the privilege of the male sex in comparison to the 'lack' that the female sex is characterized by. Male superiority is achieved by his invincible sexuality, embodied in the phallus. Freud attributes sexual identity to man only, for the penis is a determinant factor in the promulgation of man's autonomy. He casts the presence of two sexes, operating under the culture-governing imaginary and symbolic orders. Henceforth, female sexuality turns to be submissive to the grandeur of the male organ, the epitome of authority. It is suspended due to the 'envy' of the particularity of a man's penis that differs from the female 'castrated' body. The discovery of an empty body, the little girl feels that it is not only different but also strange. She departs from the mother figure, "hates" her because she no longer identifies with a hollow body, devoid of an organ similar to man's, and eventually resorts to the father for the sake of retrieving a lost body (Irigaray, *This* 69).

Logocentrism' is propagated in every aspect of the Western life. This is clear when fathoming Cixous's statement in which she argues that the 'logocentric' concept is: "The theory of culture, theory of society. The ensemble of symbolic, systems-art, religion, family, language, everything elaborates the same systems" (qtd. in Sellers 443). Cixous debunks the fact that a woman has to remain silent or be reduced to dumbness as part of her identity. She makes an "effort to undo this logocentric ideology:

to proclaim woman as the source of life, power and energy and to hail the advent of a new, feminine language which ceaselessly subverts these patriarchal binary schemes where logocentrism colludes with phallocentrism in an effort to oppress and silence women" (Moi 125). Susan Sellers infers that the Western culture is basically masculine as it favors the male to the female discourse. The supremacy of the male discourse is justified by the tradition of the West to privilege man over woman. Man's hegemony stems from the thinking ability that he "master[s]" (443). He has the power of knowledge, reason, rationality, coherence and order. Sellers posits that, "[a]ll Western thinking (At least since Descartes) has been 'Logocentric': That is, centrally organized and essentialist, based on a myth of absolute knowledge [of man] which it is continually striving to [seize]" (443).

This paper focuses mainly on the deconstruction of the fear of speech in Anne Sexton's poetry from the prism of French feminism. The reference text is Helen Cixous's "TLM" (1975) which seems like a treatise for the vindication of the female emancipation from masculine norms, devised to entrap a woman in silence. Cixous's groundbreaking article offers an overview on the construction of identity through a woman's passage from 'castration' to articulation. She unveils the obstacle that a woman has faced for centuries: the fear of speaking within a male-dominated context. She corroborates with Yann Martel in portraying the disastrous effects, culminating from the moment a female speaker proceeds in talking.

According to Cixous, "every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away" for a woman to break the silence and wake up from deep torpor is when she "just open[s] her mouth – in public" (880). A woman, caught in the cobweb of fear is well depicted by Cixous as the one whose body reacts to the inner destabilization. She invites everyone to have an insightful look at such a woman, on the verge of mental breakdown, for she has not been allowed the power of discourse. However, man has been the harbinger of the rhetoric in a manner that a woman has been displaced of the word possession and speech manifestation at a broader sense: "Listen to a woman speak at a public gathering (if she hasn't painfully lost her wind). She doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her" (881).

Negativity is looming over Cixous's above-cited quote. This idea is displayed in her frequent use of the lexical registers of decay. The absence of positively connotative words such as "painfully", "lost", doesn't" and "throws" aggravates the sense of anxiety a woman feels the very moment she starts to speak. However, she demonstrates that that "trembling body" is now functioning in favor of granting her the requisite "logic" of her outspoken comments.

'Deconstruction' is a fundamental ideal that Cixous retains from Derrida. In her writings, she deconstructs all the patriarchal restrictions, established to frame femininity as passive, dark and inefficient. Through speech, songs, laughter and dance, a woman can restore a linguistic identity outside the masculine territory. Instead of being portrayed as a scary monster or a witch, a woman redefines her selfhood with recourse to her proper feminine language. Writing, too, reinforces the passage to liberation as a woman who uses her body to write can easily forge the sovereignty of feminine texts with which she is willing to fight the canonic-based literary realm. In this regard, Cixous reiterates that a woman should evade fear, for speaking and writing are made for her to flourish. She is compelled to voice herself out, and strive to alleviate her inner affliction through transcending the enforced panic: "I didn't open my mouth, I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear" (876).

The resurrection of a woman's oral empowerment is credited with writing texts by women, for women and about women. The pursuit of an identity formation can sustain her leap towards order, coherence and inner stability women have long dwelled on the fear of everything. They only need to face others, conquer, write, confront, express her opinion and confess without worrying about censorship. The basic cause of the annihilation of the female voice for long decades ago by masculine societies lies in the fact that "the repressed of culture" possess "lovely mouths gagged with pollen" (878).

Now, women are less anxious about the fear of 'castration'. The voice they acquire substitutes for the empty body, exempt of an invincible 'penis'. The retrieval of the stifled freedom of speech heightens the female quest for speaking publicly without fear. When Cixous declares "we're not afraid of lack", she underlines how the penis, the emblem of strength and authority no longer represents a hindrance to women's growth. Women remove the fear of being castrated, for their voices are louder: "We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation" (878).

Linguistic creativity occurs in the unconscious, a terrain for the resurrection of newly-born woman. The choice of Anne Sexton lies in the fact that she has been dwarfed during workshops, negated because of mental breakdowns. Thus, confession becomes her threshold to combat fear and reclaim herself.

4. The Deconstruction of the Fear of Public Speaking in Anne Sexton's Poetry

Anne Sexton (1928-1974) is an an American confessional poet who chooses to be a poet to transcend a life full of upheavals. She committed suicide after being haunted by feelings of fear, loss and disconnection and after having an ongoing struggle with the 'self' and the 'other.' She was an eminent female poet of the 1960s whose poems mirrored the personal. Nassia Linardou claims that Sexton was considered "the high priestess" and "the Mother" (89) as far as confessional poetry was concerned. Her acclaimed talent emanated from her boldness to evoke newly-tackled issues such as mother-daughter relationship, suicide and sexuality. As a female poet, Sexton rebuilt her fragmented identity through her poems. She produced eight volumes of poems: *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*[2] (1960), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), *Live or Die* (1966). In 1969, she wrote a play entitled *Mercy Street*, followed by the book of poems *Love Poems*. In 1971, she published *Transformations* which was regarded a feminist

work. *Transformations* was followed by *The Book of Folly* (1972), *The Death Notebooks* (1974), and *The Awful Rowing toward God* (1975).

Sexton's first volume *TBPWB* was published in 1960. Diane Wood Middlebrook argues that Robert Lowell plays a pivotal role in directing Sexton to opt for the poems that reflect the "theme of bedlam" (qtd. in Crosbie 80). Not only does Lowell guide her to choose the poems in this first volume, but also motivates her to include the poems that are aligned with the "extreme mental states" in E.V. Ramakrishnan's words (qtd. in Crosbie 56). Middlebrook adds that Lowell thinks that the theme of the bedlam "would attract a wide range of reviewers to the book" (qtd. in Crosbie 80).

TBPWB is divided into two parts. Part one includes thirty poems whose themes revolve mainly around Sexton's "institutionalization and attempted suicide," whereas part two encompasses three poems which focus on "the distinction between the maternal bond and the maternal role, and the universality of suffering" (Lehrich 180).

The quest for the female linguistic identity is enmeshed with the liberation of the female body through music. According to Cixous, a woman has to cater to the exploration of her 'colonized' body and the release of her musical voice. She argues: "Text: my body— shot through with streams of song . . . what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force" (882). It seems impossible to talk about the female quest for identity without taking into consideration the redeeming power of music in unchaining the female voice and transcending the female body beyond the patriarchal norms. Hélène Cixous considers music the empowering tool for the redefinition of the female linguistic and sexual identity. The rhythm of the song may stand as a means to liberate the woman's body and unchain her tongue. When a woman moves her body through singing and dancing, there is a guarantee of its liberation.

"Lullaby" (Sexton 29) is a two-stanza poem which highlights a tendency to use the musical voice to ascertain the "theme of [woman's] rebirth" (Crosbie 93). The significance of the title stems from the combination of the act of lulling and liberating the mother tongue as well as the maternal body in an attempt to mirror "a unified portrait of [Sexton] the artist … an artist who has conceived herself" (Crosbie 93). The linguistic vibrancy is required for a woman to flap like a free bird away from the constraints of patriarchy. When the woman acquires a feminine musical language through singing, the access to writing the body flows in an untrammeled way. The act of "lulling" is an overt call for women's assertiveness. Etymologically speaking, to 'lull' means to "lull a baby to sleep… by rocking it and singing to it" (Hornby 507). 'Lullaby' is defined as a "song for lulling a baby to sleep" (Hornby 507). This poem is "a song which eases [a baby] into sleep. It is about sleep and forgetfulness" (Crosbie 91). The poem is also akin to a song sung by a woman who resorts to her melodious language to unchain her suppressed voice and resist silence. A woman effaces clouds of despair by getting absorbed in reconstructing herself through the power of the rhetoric, songs and body. She quenches the thirsty emotion for writing by having verbal affinities. Using the maternal tongue in a rhythmic way stands "against the locked screens / and the faded curtains" (3-4) that man has created. The woman equates herself with "a goat [which] calls in his dreams" (7). The same goat is there, she "calls hush- / a-bye" (25-6). The indefiniteness of "a goat" is wiped by "the goat" to highlight the sound transformation a woman undergoes through the course of time. She does not wane behind the claustrophobic space of an imprisoning Bedlam.

The basic thematic input, in the poem "Music Swims Back to Me" (Sexton 6-7) revolves around the emotional void a woman may be engulfed in. Being lost, missing home, and feeling "strapped" (20) in the mental hospital add to her dilemma. She is fighting to regain her sanity for she is tormented. She is "plagued by deep depression, anxiety attacks, and severe mood swings erupting in violence" (Lehrich 171). Raising a question at the start of the poem heralds a sort of disillusionment. On her process to inquire further and fill in gaps, she overcomes obstacles. The hysterical state that lends itself to a critical state of madness urges the female speaker to seek directions in order to get back home. "Which way is home?" (1) She asks fervently in an attempt to find the right path that can take her back home. The very concept of "home" is of a galvanizing importance, for it implicates a kind of warmth, serenity and belonging. She feels confused for losing stability. The darkness outside is equated with the darkness inside. The whole atmosphere signals a decaying place where "the light [is] out / dark is moving / no sign posts in this room" (2-4).

The recurrent use of negatively-loaded sentences such as "[t]here are no sign posts" (4) and "there are no signs to tell the way" (26) accentuate the speaker's inner turmoil. Darkness functions as the external and internal factors in the female personal crisis. The dark sky reflects her dark self as she is blinded by the absence of clarity. The way back home is too hazy for her to detect any way out. The use of the word "night" (9-18-31) thrice indicates that blackness is looming over. The amount of blackness creates a gothic and eclipsing dimension. It is striking that the cosmic world, the outer space mingles with the inner space to impregnate a sense of dislocation and disintegration. "[T]he stars were strapped in the sky / and that moon [was] too bright" (20-1) to reach the way home. It is quite noticeable that from the outset, urging the "Mister" to "wait" (1) in order to tell her the way back home is unmistakable. The inscription of patriarchy is unquestionable. The same structure is redundant in "You, Doctor Martin" and in this poem. In both poems, the speaker says: "You, Doctor Martin, walk" ("You, Doctor Martin" 1) and "Wait Mister" ("Music Swims Back to Me" 1). These statements are a translation of a woman's confusion, for her inner and outer loss is caused by the masculine arrogance, which explains her "wry attitude towards the doctor" (Fukuda 85).

In every poem, there are two opposing images which do converge. There is a move from alienation and dislocation into integration thanks to the power of music. This particular poem is Sexton's first "breakaway from adolescent lyrics" (Kumin xxxi). Juggling with words and grappling to liberate the voice is through the juxtaposition of two divergent states in a rhythmic and musical style. "Music Swims Back to Me" overlaps a myriad of feelings and thoughts, paralleling the swift oscillation between various moods in the first stanza and in the rest of the stanzas. At first glance, darkness fuels the inevitable seclusion a woman feels at the worst places on earth. The dislocation is obliterated by the rhythmic coherence that music creates. Beside

the linguistic strength, the female body parallels the production of poems through the hegemony of music. The more a woman identifies with her body, the more she thrives on writing. In fact, music generates a sense of integrity. Her self-esteem in the literary scene is manifested by listening to music. Such a transformed woman defies these "codes" in order "to survive" (Cixous 880). Out of the sudden, her pessimistic mood switches to merriment. She is stronger as a female after fathoming the clues of music. She is able to sing:

La la la, Oh music swims back to me
And I can feel the tune they played
The night they left me
In this private institution on a hill. (7-10)

Eventually, the female speaker avows that music enables her to move to language. She is no longer fearful of remaining dumb in the asylum, for the act of singing, like confession, endows her with the potential to unchain the self and body from the male-bound constraints from which she has long suffered:

This music swims back to me
The night I came I danced in a circle
And was not afraid
Mister? (Sexton 6-7)

A voyage for self redefinition is at the heart of "The Exorcists" (Sexton 16-7). Included in the first part of *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, this poem sketches the themes of loss, fear and 'estrangement.' It is about a frustrated woman who strives to decode the meaning of things and the significance of people around her but in vain. She cannot identify with the internal and external world. She struggles to come to terms with herself because of "that wandering ghost" (8). She also tries to decipher her forfeited life, for the society she belongs to is male-defined. During summer time, the woman is enthralled in doubt. She is skeptical about everything and everyone. She joins other women to embark on a long journey to reach self-definition and to fight for self-recognition.

The female speaker's loss- expressing voice does not hinder her from rediscovering her body to eradicate the sense of 'estrangement' she feels inside. The notion of the female 'estrangement' is apparent in the first two stanzas. When she avows that she "know[s] you not, this room never," (3) the amount of uncertainty hovers over the place where she is. Everything around her sounds "strange": the "dress" (4), "the anonymous spoons" (5), "this calendar" and even "the pulse" (6). She is barely able to come to terms with herself and the things that surround her. That is why "that yellow moth" (9) decides to embark on a self- discovery voyage. The word "moth" is used metaphorically to designate the female figure who is determined to "prepare" for a new start, to a new place, by quitting her "summer bed" (9). Initiating a transformative trip of the "I" towards coherence will eventually efface her inner crisis.

The speaker's loss of orientation is evoked through the abundant use of "that" (8), "this" (3) and "these" (7). The alternation between "this" and "that" increases the inner turmoil of the speaker whose compass is at stake. The lack of direction is reinforced by the use of a myriad of tenses as in "know" (3), "will not cry" (12), and "I was brown" (13) mirror the inward struggle of the self to find an adequate direction. Throughout the process of the formation of one's identity, the female speaker, in this poem, has to move from one place to another to decipher the clues of her existence. Unable to identify with her room urges her to seek a new space where she redefines herself and rewrites her body.

The voyage, to the beach, is fundamental for it "enables [the self] to view everything as "strange" [and] may actually help her to mediate more productively the relation between body and language. Accordingly, she must keep the subjective unity of the "I" in a productive tension with the strangeness of maternal rhythm" (Smith A. 42). In this poem, writing about the "thighs" (14), the "arms" (20), the "skin" (26) and the "[b]odies" (26) of women punctuate the notion of the liberation of the female body. The more the speaker mentions these body parts, the more her writing identity is forged. The allusion to the body parts does illuminate their significance in the ongoing voyage for regaining female identity. The "lightning" (25) of the body, in summer time, reinforces its value:

It was brown with August,
The clapping waves at my thighs
And a storm riding into the cove. We swam
While the others beached and burst. (13-6)

In celebrating the body, a woman who sings, writes her body and speaks is capable to deconstruct the 'castration anxiety' that Freud develops to show that a woman's body is empty because it lacks the penis, the symbol of primacy. The active role of these organs is highlighted in the fusion between nature and the body. There is a clear allusion to the voyage the female body undergoes in its quest for rebirth. The mutual communication between the female body and the natural landscape does not exclude the speaker's inevitable struggle against the "clapping waves" (14). "The arms of the thunder" (20) have "breathed in air" (21) as well as "stroked past the boat" (22). At last, they "thrashed for shore" (23).

5. Conclusion

Fear, the destructive feeling, has become a rival for women who need to struggle in order to move to speech. In psychoanalysis, Freud believes that they are castrated, reduced to nonexistence. To reverse this allegation, French feminist Hélène Cixous strives to maintain the substantiality of women's leap towards self-growth through liberating their voices and

writing their bodies. Reading Anne Sexton's poems from Cixous's "TLM" has offered a platform for the formulation of a new woman, not afraid to speak, sing, dance and write her body, for it is impregnating. A deep dive into "Lullaby", "Music Swims Back to Me" and "The Exorcists" has illuminated the liberation of women from the 'logocentric' dynamic whereby every female figure was "immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain" (Cixous 876). Now, she is seizing the opportunity to speak publicly in the feminine jargon, transforming anxiety into a tenacity for language acquisition.

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Endnotes

[1] The Laugh of the Medusa will be referred to as "TLM".

[2] *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* will be referred to as *TBPWB.*